

PRINCETON IN AFRICA

Fellow Report: 6-month

This report focuses on the details of your fellowship that have changed and evolved since your 3-month report; it also aims to help you begin formulating greater reflections about your fellowship experience. To complete this report, you may find it helpful to have a copy of your 3-month report form nearby.

We will use your comments to assess partner organizations, site placements, stipends, and overall logistics. The information you include may be shared with the Board of Directors and future Fellows. We may use your comments to give feedback to partner organizations as well. Please indicate when information is not to be shared outside of PiAf and rest assured that we will honor your request.

Feel free to attach relevant anecdotes, emails, or photos to supplement the required responses.

Your Personal Information

Organization: International Rescue Committee
City, Country: Voinjama, Liberia

1. How have you been dealing with money during the course of your Fellowship? Have you opened a bank account? Are you using traveler's checks? Relying on ATMs? Any advice on money/banking issues to share with future Fellows?

My stipend is being paid in cash. Because that's quite a bit of cash to receive each month, to help me budget (and also so that I don't lose it/it gets stolen, etc.) I have the IRC hold some of my stipend most months. Interns do not have an IRC account, but the Finance Office is able to hold the amount and I've been confirming the balance with them during the past few months. I can withdraw the amount whenever I need. I definitely recommend that future interns come with quite a bit of cash, as you need a lot of money upfront to get things set up but do not receive payment until the end of the first month. There are a few ATMs that work for some people in Monrovia, but it really depends on the kind of debit card you use. I haven't had success and would not recommend relying on them. Everywhere in Liberia will take US dollars, even at the markets. The exchange is about 70LD for 1 USD. There are a few upscale hotels that take credit cards, but not likely anywhere that a Fellow would go.

2. Are you taking or have you taken anti-malarials during your fellowship? If so, what kind and how/where did you acquire them?

Yes – I am taking doxycycline. Take anti-malarials in Liberia! It's a big debate. Although people still get malaria, it is often less severe if you're taking anti-malarials and Liberia is a hotbed for cerebral malaria. Through my health insurance (not IRC insurance but I believe I was under Anthem at the time) the Doxy was very inexpensive. There is also a big discount for bulk purchases at Sam's Club and Costco – for the entire year plus a number of extra pills, it was definitely under \$100.

Your Work

3. Have your responsibilities evolved or changed since the start of your fellowship? If so, how?

In general, my responsibilities are technically the same as they were at the start of my fellowship. However, with a changing senior team at the IRC office and my increasing efficiency at work, I've been able to undertake (or will be undertaking) a few other projects. In addition to reporting/proposal writing/compliance work (some of

which I'm now leading and coordinating directly), I will be starting a research project. I'm not sure of the specific topic yet but am hoping to make it relevant to the IRC's future mission in Liberia and also focus on the current political situation in country as a topic interesting to me. I will also be working with the Project Manager on a program that I'm especially passionate about to learn more about the day-to-day aspects of project management. I've been thrown into quite a bit of visibility work that has occupied my time for the past two months and am currently working to finalize these projects before beginning new projects.

4. Please describe in greater detail 1-2 projects that you have undertaken or accomplishments you have made in the last 3 months. (Feel free to update us on a project you have been working on since the beginning of your fellowship or to share information about a new project.)

Working directly with the Country Director, I have worked to develop (including design, write, etc.) an Annual Report for the Liberia country office. This was mostly completed in November and December at the request of the Country Director and will be distributed in a few weeks. I am also now directly leading the reporting process for a health project, so am managing the back and forth between the field office, the IRC health team, and the HQ grants unit. For the next large proposal, I will also be given more responsibility acting directly with HQ and the technical team.

Your Fellowship in the Future

5. Would you recommend that this fellowship position be repeated again in the future? If so, what about your post might be improved upon by/for future Fellows?

I certainly recommend this posting for future Fellows. I feel that I've highly benefited from a position that is about 60-70% field time and 30-40% Monrovia time. Though I've learned quite a lot at work, the IRC positions are not the most 'hands-on.' Therefore, what I've learned about development, about Africa, and (not to be cheesy) about myself has mostly occurred during the time I spend in the field. Though most other positions do get some field experience, it's different to be based there, build relationships there, and just by default of being based there, getting assignments that are more hands-on than they would have been had I been based in Monrovia. Though I was very nervous about this placement, there were many pleasant surprises and comforts in Voinjama. It's been more challenging than some other placements (at least geographically and I think, personally) but that means the benefit is much higher. I also feel strongly that having had substantial field experience will benefit my work in future positions, as I'm often troubleshooting numerous issues that arise in rural, remote areas and often doing so independently as one of very few expats in town.

I think the position needs to be redefined at the Liberia office. They are considering bringing in a national intern for the Grants Office which might help with this. As most of the senior staff is new, I've been given responsibilities by everyone from my direct boss to the Country Director and I think that creates strains on the actual assigned duties I'm supposed to be prioritizing. It's made it difficult to follow up on some of the personal projects and long-term projects I'd discussed with my supervisor at the beginning of the internship. Also, I've essentially become the Grants/Communications Intern/assistant whenever there are VIPs around (which I really like doing!) though my position is technically the Grants Intern. I like that there are other duties that are not fully grants-related, but the position title should reflect this.

6. What would you tell someone who is interested in being the next PiAf Fellow at your post?

Don't be afraid of living in the field (partially because your time will be split between the field and Monrovia). Liberia is a fantastic place to learn about development and African politics at the moment as it's in a very interesting transition phase, and there is a wonderful, highly integrated and active network of Liberian professionals and expats in-country. This position really offers the best of both worlds, being based in the field with some seriously rural adventures, but also having the professionalism and benefits of working with the IRC.

Your Reflections

7. Since the beginning of your fellowship, have you returned home (i.e., for the December/January holidays)? If so, how did leaving your posting in Africa affect you and your work?

I elected not to return home, but met with my parents and my sister in Europe. I highly recommend giving yourself a break (at least if you're based in rural Liberia...) I was worried about it being difficult to come back, but in fact I felt rejuvenated and was really ready for the next six months, even knowing that January would be particularly intense at work. I'm very close with my family and I know it would have been difficult for me to have the holidays without seeing them. Fortunately, they were able to travel and meet me, because I think going home would have been a bit hectic. It is also a very different thing to contrast your home environment to your Africa environment rather than just traveling – from my former experiences, I remember suburban US being the worst culture shock, even after Europe, so perhaps it wasn't quite so jarring as going home would have been.

In addition to feeling rejuvenated, this trip confirmed for me that I really do feel most excited and stimulated by working in the field with other people who understand this kind of drive to be abroad. My family is very supportive, but it is hard for them (and my friends and family back home) to truly understand the things that have become so second nature for me.

I only took two weeks off of work (I could have taken off more but am saving vacation days for future travels) but the office was very supportive of me taking a break, regardless of vacation days technically allocated.

8. What will you do differently in the next 6 months until the conclusion of your fellowship-- at work? Outside of work?

Work: I've already started taking more initiative to be involved (even just visiting and taking pictures) in projects that I'm interested in. My boss and the rest of the staff are extremely encouraging of my pursuing personal interests, so long as everything else gets done. I've figured out who is most helpful at arranging things and who is most knowledgeable, so I plan to really make an effort to conduct more site visits while in the field. These visits are often rejuvenating after hours spent editing and writing reports and allow me to take advantage of my position in the field. No one ever minds so long as I make up the time by working later in the evening or on the weekend to finish other duties. I also plan to take more direct lead on the reporting process. I find that I learn the most when my boss is away and I'm put in charge, so I'm hoping to be entrusted with more direct coordination and liaising with HQ.

Non-work: I'm hoping to do a bit more exploring in Liberia/Monrovia – there are a few destinations I keep saying I need to get to and haven't yet. It's a bit difficult to do traveling because of the IRC's regulations. I also am looking forward to socializing more with my friends in Voinjama. I became closer with a group of coworkers before the holidays and I really plan to make efforts to prioritize those relationships, especially as some expat friends in town are leaving.

9. After 6 months in the field, what have you learned about Africa, development, and living abroad? What issues do you want to learn more about during the remainder of your fellowship experience?

Where to start? I think I'll better be able to answer this after returning home and having those moments of 'how do I know that?' Assuming that I knew next to nothing prior to starting this year aside from the academic development debates and African Studies case studies (Algeria, Kenya, South Africa, Congo...) I'll just list the biggest take-aways that I have thus far.

Firstly, I've learned anything that I know about Liberia and post-conflict work in the past six months. I won't say this relates to post-conflict African nations in general, but I anticipated that Liberia would have very little as a post-conflict nation. I was shocked at how quickly members of the international community move in and set up shop in war-torn environments, including many western comforts that I was not expecting to find in Monrovia, let alone in the field. I've also been reminded at how transient 'home' is for so many Africans. Again, not wanting to

generalize, even those in small towns in the field have typically moved around throughout their lives, especially as displaced populations. Finally, being right in the middle of election chaos in West Africa and as Liberia prepares for elections in October, I've benefited from listening to Liberian friends and African coworkers discuss the problems involved with democracy and the election system in Africa in general and in Liberia. I'm questioning a lot of perceptions I had about how democracies and elections function in Africa and am eager to learn more about this.

I've learned a great deal about the formal development sector. I've seen a lot of theories that I learned about in the school setting actually being implemented. I learned how the community works, how organizations function with one another within a country, and have been impressed with the emphasis placed on capacity-building and local ownership, though this doesn't always work. Obviously from my job, I see the donor-NGO relationship and understand what is lacking in accountability (even with the IRC, which has a good record). I also am curious as to the benefits of high-up technical experts making decisions that should likely be made on a more locally-focused basis. Mostly, I see the vast difference between what is achievable through private vs. public sector, and where each can contribute (if properly managed) for 'development' to take place. I've also witnessed the differences between the more long-term development mindset of projects implemented and proposals created in the past six months as opposed to the crisis-mode, emergency response work that I'm currently witnessing.

As this is my first real experience with the aid expat community, all observations are learning experiences. I actually have not been so disgusted by cynicism and depravity – it exists in some circles, but mostly I've been impressed with individuals' commitment to Liberia. I certainly see a big divide between expats and locals (not counting Liberians who were raised abroad) and wonder how that differs in a highly impoverished and undereducated country like Liberia. Aside from all of my social observations, I am generally surprised at how much older the expat community abroad is. In addition to that circle, I've been pleasantly surprised at how easy it was for me to befriend (genuinely) Liberian coworkers and members of the community in Voinjama. I've certainly made efforts, as it's easy to hide in your compound as an IRC employee, but efforts have been relatively minimal in exchange for feeling like a part of the community. This has been the most reassuring and encouraging aspect of my life in the field, even when all other aspects feel really tough.

I'm looking forward to delving more into some of the issues that I mentioned above, including the issue of elections and politics in Africa. This is becoming more and more present in Liberia as campaigning season begins and I'm eager to get more experience with politics and regional issues. I will do this through an independent project at work and personally, through exploring organizations active in these issues and working to increase my awareness of local issues. It's also been interesting to see the various regional bodies' responses to the Cote d'Ivoire situation and I'm (along with everyone here) bracing myself for what will happen.

10. How have the first 6 months of your fellowship shaped your plans for the future?

Most obviously, after six months of living in the field I'm realizing that I want to stay abroad and work rather than go back to the States and attempt to find work there. I do want to switch fields slightly, but am now even considering staying in Liberia if I'm able to find a job. I feel strongly that going back to the States would not be satisfying for me at this point – both professionally and personally. I am loving meeting and working with people from all over the world and I know that the work I'd be doing, even for a fantastic Africa/International politics-related office, in the States would not be nearly as stimulating. Speaking to friends in jobs in related fields back home has confirmed this. I know that I will go back home for graduate school eventually, but am still trying to figure out what to focus in. I think I will get further in figuring that out staying abroad and getting more international experience.

Additionally, I am thinking of switching gears a bit. I always wanted to work in Africa on development, but I'm finding what I'm actually passionate about is not 'development' per se, but more government-related/human rights issues. I would certainly consider working for a different kind of NGO just to contrast with the IRC and other work I've done, but I'm focusing my job search on offices that focus more on governance/policy work, potentially even leading to law school rather than graduate school.

11. It is often helpful for us to draw from PiAf Fellows' words when we disseminate information about PiAf. However, we hate to hassle you whenever we need a blurb! So, please tell us a bit here about what PiAf means to you. Your insights and anecdotes give interested supporters a glimpse into the scope of your projects and potential to make a difference in one year. Please write a few paragraphs as if you were being asked to comment on PiAf for a promotional brochure. What would you say to a potential supporter? An interested applicant? An employer? A friend? What does PiAf mean to you? What have you gained or learned from this experience?

From the beginning of my experience with Princeton in Africa many months ago, I was honored to be surrounded by such driven, dedicated Fellows. Being a part of this group of individuals who are and who remain dedicated to Africa is both motivating and humbling. For those of us who were set on moving to Africa to work for and experience the continent, (not to vacation and certainly not to 'save' the continent) Princeton in Africa gave us the ability to do so.

Being entrusted by both PiAf and by our employers ensures that we would not become complacent – we are constantly questioning and reevaluating our work as we attempt to make real contributions. As Fellows we know that we are here to learn, experience, and grow - steps that must happen before we can truly have an impact. But it is only through the experiences that this year has afforded us that our future impact will be possible. Many of our friends back home think we are either saving lives in war-ravaged Africa or living in a colonizer's version of the continent. But we know that neither of those images is real, nor helpful. Upon arrival, we knew we would be challenged; we knew that on occasion, we would be demoralized, lonely, and overwhelmed. However, this year I watched a refugee camp spring up in Liberia, listened to lengthy local political debates on nearly impassable rural roads, and sipped palm wine while discussing Liberia's future with local friends in the field. That all supplements my working day activities – visiting refurbished health clinics, writing project reports, interviewing women benefiting from newly discovered economic autonomy and working on program management. Those minor moments of doubt seem like nothing given the context of all that I have gained this year as a Princeton in Africa Fellow. I could never have fathomed how much my day to day interactions would alter my perceptions about the world. Like many Fellows, one year is not enough. I am set on staying for more – something that is possible after having the responsibilities and experiences of a Princeton in Africa Fellow.